

Enhancing Creativity in the Fire Service  
with the Help of Business Innovation.

Executive Development

By: Peter J. Siecienski  
Danbury Fire Department  
Danbury, Connecticut

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## **ABSTRACT**

Concern over changes in the economic and social mosaic have challenged the traditional fire service. The problem that prompted this research was that the fire service was not responsive to taxpayer mandates. A lack of innovation and creativity mired the fire service in complacency.

The purpose of this research was to provide techniques and methods to assist the fire administrator in delivering an innovative service. This study used the action research method.

The research questions were:

1. What problems currently exist in the fire service due to a lack of innovation and change?
2. What techniques of business innovation may apply to assist the fire service in proactive movement?
3. What factors impede the ability of the fire service to move in a creative fashion?
4. What fire service programs or systems are currently in place that focus on innovation and creative movement?

The literature review focused on two basic areas. First, a study of fire service related information. Research conducted a historical, theoretical and practical evaluation of contributions made by a variety of fire department personnel. Second, an evaluation of the business sector to research techniques and implemented plans of creativity.

The results showed an eroding economic base and a complacent fire service attitude.

Results included the study of fire department programs as well as evaluating business examples of success. Findings documented a mix of both business and fire service techniques of innovation that provided a framework for fire service administrators.

Recommendations included the implementation of a customer service survey, designed to elicit a complete response and evaluation. In addition, a recommendation to solicit creative ideas and develop alliances to stimulate solutions on economic concerns. The need to develop national consensus on marketing and information technology issues warranted additional research.

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## INTRODUCTION

Economic and social changes have challenged the traditional fire service. “Fire protection services have often been characterized as “traditional” and resistant to change”(International City Management Association, [ICMA], 1988, p. 468). This mired state does not bode well for a public safety agency that must compete for shrinking taxpayer dollars. “The passage of Proposition 1 in Idaho, 2 ½ in Massachusetts, 13 in California and 24 in Alaska, reflect the taxpayers desire to control their local lives”(Keefe, 1984, p. 16).

The problem that prompted this research was that the fire service and its managers were not responsive to taxpayer mandates. In addition, the fire service needs to tap the business community as a source of creativity and innovation.

By contrast, the business community has realized the benefits of innovation, creativity and change for proactive growth.

Research on industrialized nations shows conclusively that American workers outproduce workers in Germany and France by about 20 %, workers in Britain by over 30 percent and Japanese workers by over 60 percent.... America leads; these days no country is closing the gap. (Waterman, 1994, p. 16).

The success realized in the business work has not come by accident. Our private sector counterparts continue to address the issues that face the fire service today. In their book, “Sacred Cows Make the Best Burgers”, authors, Kriegel and Brandt, define the term Sacred Cow. “A plodding, bovine mammal of numerous stomachs and dubious intelligence regarded in

some climes as holy in origin and therefore immune from ordinary treatment”(Kriegel & Brandt, 1996, p. 1).

To maintain an innovative and creative atmosphere the challenge becomes putting to pasture these traditions.

The fire service, as well, with its resistance to change and its tradition, has its own sacred cows. The ability to capitalize on the success of business will provide an avenue for the fire service to become more proactive.

Dealing with new areas of knowledge will be one of the challenges for the fire service.

Breaking out of its paradigm and challenging the status quo of existing technologies, methods and attitudes regarding fire protection will create stress and conflict and it will surely result in the evolution of a new fire service.

(ICMA, 1988, p. 471)

The purpose of this research was to provide techniques and methods to assist the fire service administrator in building an innovative business. The study used the action research method. The research questions included:

1. What problems currently exist in the fire service due to a lack of innovation and change?
2. What techniques of business innovation may apply to assist the fire service in proactive movement?

3. What factors impede the ability of the fire service to move in a creative fashion?
4. What fire service programs or systems are currently in place that focus on the innovation and creative movement?

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Historically, the fire service has been resistant to change. The Wingspread IV Conference Report of 1996 detailed the premise of this resistance and the reliance on tradition. This conference report on Statements of Critical Issues to The Fire and Emergency Services in the United States is the fourth report of the last three decades.

To move successfully into the future, the fire service needs leaders capable of developing and managing their organizations in dramatically changed environments. To compete successfully, the fire service needs smart, tough, nice, modern managers. These managers must be able to operate successfully in competitive, changing and non-traditional environments. They must have vision, ability to predict, and effective human relation skills. (International Association of Fire Chief's Foundation, [IAFCF], Wingspread IV, 1996, p. 8)

The Wingspread committee delivered reports for each of the previous three decades. The author includes as Appendix A the important comments of these conferences.

The Wingspread Report of 1966, Statements of National Significance, summarized major points of concern. Included were:

- There is a serious lack of communication between the public and the fire service.
- The public is complacent toward the rising trend of life and property loss by the fire service.
- Fire service labor and management, municipal officers and administrators must join together if professionalism is to become a reality. (IAFCF, 1996, p. 16)

These statements, while 30 years old, still are barriers which face today's fire service.

The complacency that has gripped both the public and fire service, has resulted in a lack of motivation, innovation, and creativity. "The fire service must move forward to remove barriers and take the needed steps to interact with the community 365 days a year"(IAFCF, 1996, p. 6). In their resolve to maximize the efficient delivery of additional services, fire departments are finding increasing difficulty in competing for funding.

The work of the fire service continues to grow and become more complex each day.

Experience indicates that budgets are being cut, staffing levels are reduced, and the ability to purchase necessary tools and equipment is hampered. It is imperative that the American fire service support the development of nationally recognized service delivery criteria that address efficiency, effectiveness and safety. (IAFCF, 1996, p. 6)

The significance of the fire service's inability to move forward and eliminate these barriers of resistance, is much more than the ability to secure funds, motivate personnel and deliver efficient services. The demands of the taxpayer and municipal leaders will challenge the existence of the



fire service as we know it. “In order to survive, the fire service must market itself and the service it provides, demonstrating to its customers the necessity and value of what it does”(IAFCF, 1996, p. 2).

Chilling statements for personnel in the fire service, yet we are not unique. The issues of innovation, motivation and creativity are not new. The inability to remove barriers and acknowledge a proactive movement has challenged business as well.

The failure of business to adapt is evident throughout the business world.

On the surface Sears had it made. More and more people with less and less time buying through the mail. But while many new competitors came out with slick formats, targeting specific markets with state-of-the-art products, Sears stuck stubbornly to its old formula-that Webster’s dictionary of a catalog selling the same old products, with the same tired format. (Kriegel & Brandt, 1996, p. 46)

The result, with mail order on the rise, the Sear’s company catalog is now a memory.

The bright side is that there are shining examples of success in the business community. The resilience of business to innovate and motivate their personnel is inspirational. While commenting on the success of Merck, a high technology drug company, Robert Waterman Jr. states: “Like Rubbermaid and P&G(Procter and Gamble), Merck wins in the marketplace by out-innovating the competition”(Waterman, 1994, p. 207). Waterman continued to detail the attention successful companies give to consumers and employees alike.

That significant attention to profit, efficiency, morale, and productivity, should be a model to the fire service. “The use of non-traditional factors, such as those used by businesses and industry, need to be adopted”(IAFCF, 1996, p. 6).

Specifically, the fire service and its rigid organization rarely delegates control, yet by “giving up control to gain control”(Waterman, 1994, p. 29)it may actually stimulate creativity and motivation.

The fire service has worked to eliminate mistakes. It has taken that premise into the crust of its administration. As identified by business, providing a cautious atmosphere stifles innovation. “When people get cautious, innovation, creativity, and originality go out the window, and the possibility of gaining an edge on the competition goes right along with them”(Kriegel & Brandt, 1996, p. 91).

The methodology of successful businesses, customer service and marketing will aid in achieving innovation and creativity. The fire service’s ability to meet its customers' expectations, to develop strategies, partnerships and competitively market its service will provide the benefit needed to not only move forward but survive in the future.

“The fire service must forge strategies, alliances, and partnerships at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as with the private sector”(IAFCF, 1996, p. 11).

This project relates to the Executive Fire Officer module of Executive Development in that it deals specifically with issues of creativity, innovation and marketing.

## Literature Review

The literature review included numerous examples detailing fire service tradition, resistance and promise. A collection of business references offered perspective and various techniques of innovation.

Perhaps the most significant contribution to this research was that of the Wingspread IV Conference Report, Statements of Critical Issues to The Fire and Emergency Services in the United States.

Commenting on emerging issues of national importance, Wingspread IV identified several issues that influenced this project.

The fire service has begun a process to view problems in the customer's terms, not in the fire department's terms. This involves changing the ways the fire service has traditionally used its resources by expanding the perspective of firefighters and fire service managers to include mitigation of the negative impact on humans as well as property. (IAFCF, 1996, p. 4)

This emphasis on customer service was an integral point in developing efficiency for the future.

...It is a critical responsibility that fire service managers must undertake as well as understand if they are to meet the increasing demands that will be placed upon them in the future by elected and appointed officials, professional groups, special interest groups and individual citizens. (ICMA, 1988, p. 417)

The Wingspread IV report continued to impress the author with its clear definition of the need to market the fire service.

The fire service has never had a greater need to competitively market itself and its services.

The fire service must recognize the changing environment of society and develop competitive strategies for marketing its services to its stakeholders, representing a wide spectrum of key individuals, public and elected officials, and various organizations. (IAFCF, 1996, p. 6)

The ability to identify trends and patterns of society concerning the fire service became crucial to understanding the customers' expectations. Chief Ron Coleman being direct and frank comments “regardless of our perception of our own value to the communities we serve, legislatures and public policy makers in the industrial democracies continue to put pressure on us...”(Coleman, September, 1997, p. 34).

This ability to extend the customer to include not only the policy makers, but as Jeffrey Smith illustrates, “Taxpayers are the fire department's customers - and boss”(Smith, 1997, p. 78).

The customer as the boss dictated a strong message. “The passage of Proposition 1 in Idaho, 2 ½ in Massachusetts, 13 in California and 24 in Alaska, reflect the taxpayers desire to control their local lives”(Keefe, 1984, p. 16).

The concepts of marketing, customer service and understanding traditional basics have influenced the financial and social landscape on which the fire service operates. “The average citizen already perceives a very low risk of fire loss”(Harvey & Fisher, 1997, p. 69).

Coleman's article "Steps to Failure and a Ladder to Success" details the ability to provide perceived value to the customer.(Coleman, March, 1996) Coleman advocates the use of awareness, accountability, energy and advocacy as the means to prevent an organization from failure. Coleman draws parallel to Charles Darwin's "Survival of the Fittest" theory that "...most people miss its most important implication: that as evolving organisms survive, ones remaining the same usually die off"(Coleman, March, 1996, p. 22).

Collectively, the comments of Coleman, Harvey, Fisher, ICMA and the IAFCF Wingspread IV report greatly influenced this research. The ability to meet customer expectations and market the fire service is an important theme of this study.

In reviewing fire service periodicals pertinent to the project, perhaps Tom Brennan's comments at the 1997 Fire Department Instructor Conference helped to provide focus. "How do you know how to innovate if you don't know the tradition you're innovating"(Brennan, 1997, p. 76)?

Loflin and Kipp(1997) supported this idea of tradition and basics, their use of training as a basic tool highlights this point. They contend that the innovation and creativity of training for risk management purposes, leads to successful incidents.

It becomes the strategy of the fire service to overcome barriers and evolve. It became obvious to the author that complacency was a factor, impeding fire service innovation. "History is replete with battles lost through complacency"(Manning, September, 1996, p. 6).

Combined the work of Brennan, Loflin, Kipp and Manning, contributed needed historical and risk perspective to this research.

Chief Randy Bruegman recognized that this element of change and evolution is on the horizon. “As we look to the 21st century, we should ask ourselves what influences are emerging today that will effect the services we provide and how we will deliver them in the future”(Bruegman, January, 1997, p. 23). Bruegman identified changes in the social mosaic, political landscape, aging of America and importance of information technology. “The level of information that chiefs will need to support decisions they make about fire suppression and Emergency Medical Service (EMS) delivery will steadily increase, as will the tools that will provide the information”(January 1997, p. 28).

In a continuing article, Bruegman reinforced previously documented research. “In the fire service, the status quo, a sense of permanence and tradition, has been the backbone of the culture and a constant for many of our organizations”(Bruegman, April, 1997, p. 86).

Bruegman (April, 1997) greatly influenced this project by evaluating the clash over cultures and strategies of change. Of particular importance, was his idea of understanding whether change initiated internally or externally to the organization?

When cultures and strategies clash over a change initiated inside the organization, presumably yours, invariably the culture will win out. If the change is externally motivated, be it political, economic or service driven, and the organizational culture doesn't embrace the initiative, the organization is in a position where it actually may not survive.( p. 88)

Research located two supporting articles to Bruegman's theory of change and survival. The issue of privatized fire service delivery endorsed the concept of external change. Recent moves by Wackenhut and Rural/Metro into the previously untouched areas of the fire service are gaining momentum. “When asked whether Wackenhut intended to seek other fire contracts,

Cannon said his company's fire division has "not taken off as fast" as the police support and prison divisions, but he expects modest growth to continue "because of the cost savings" that privatized fire service offers"(Ostrow and Garza, 1997, p. 20).

Additionally, Jim Page supported Bruegmans theory of change to the social mosaic and aging of America. By using examples of the aging fire service and the contribution the most senior firefighters still make. Page is a proponent that age may certainly be a benefit to the organization.

In many paid fire departments, it seems that a lot of members start retiring in their mid-40's.

Oh they still show up for work. But their heart isn't in it. Many of these people get bitchy and self-absorbed. They don't accept any further responsibility to contribute to the organization or its future. Worst of all, they provide a terrible example for new firefighters who work around them. (Page, 1997, p. 10)

The contributions of Bruegman, as supported by Ostrow, Garza and Page gave credence to the issue of change in the fire service.

"Thus, the challenge for fire officers is to motivate and provide support for good performance, to encourage innovation, and to provide a consistently high-quality service in a changing society"(Grant & Hoover, 1994, p. 429).

The ability to develop strategic partnerships is necessary to ensure the evolution of an effective organization. Coleman(October, 1996, p. 28) described the necessity of the fire chief to effectively, operate in the larger political arena where consensus building will help get things done. He cautioned chiefs must learn survival skills and develop an adroitness to help them outmaneuver those who practice the petty sort of politics.

The lack of awareness of the fire problem has lead to apathy among the public, in fact, “Many mayors are uninformed about the dimensions and nature of their own city’s fire problem”(Schaenman, Lundquist, Stambaugh, Camozzo, Granito, 1987, p. 5).

A specific alliance or partnership designed to deliver better customer service is in existence in Fort Lauderdale (Fla). “The merger of the Fire Rescue and Building Department "gave the public safety organizations a higher order of consideration in municipal budgeting..." according to Fire Chief Dan Harkins”(Mattern, 1996, p. 56). This merger accomplished an improvement in communication and “eliminated organizational barriers”(Mattern, 1996).

This example is one of scarcity within the fire service. Many sources of fire service literature contributed to identifying the tradition and history of resistance to innovation. Additional fire service experts theorized on mechanisms to achieve innovation, creativity and positive movement. “The fire service must forge strategies, alliances and partnerships at the Federal, State and local levels, as well as with the private sector”(IAFCF, 1996, p. 11). Few documented fire service programs were in actual existence. This deficiency left the author wondering if the humorous comments of a Bill Manning editorial were indeed the status quo.

The word “customer” is a very important part of the modern fire service vocabulary and it is essential that fire-rescues use this word in public as many times as possible every day. That way, the public and public officials know your patronizing them and they will be more apt not only to approve an increase in your travel budget, but to forgive you for burning their houses down as well. (Manning, January 1996, P. 6)



The comments of Manning and Schaenman revealed the disconcerting issue of complacency. Coleman and Mattern documented a need to form alliances to benefit the fire service. Issues of complacency and the formation of alliances are an integral part of this research.

The literature review documented the value of having vision and a strategic plan in tough economic times. Chief Kenneth Burris(1996) identified factors contributing to the fire service economic changes. In summary he stated five basic reasons:

1. Problem Deflation - The reduction of incidence in severity of fire in the United States.
2. Erosion of the economic base - A declining tax base from migration out of our older cities especially in the Northeast to the sunbelt or out of the country.
3. Inflation - An average has doubled the cost of service delivery.
4. Taxpayer Revolt - Taxpayers increasingly question the quality and effectiveness of the services they receive for their tax dollars.
5. Limits on Economic Growth - The inability to sustain double digit growth in order to cover increased service delivery costs. ( p. 64)

By identifying these elements, Burris sets the stage for the need to continuously plan to achieve vision while providing value. This theory of continuous planning received support from two additional sources. "The strategic planning cycle is dynamic rather than static"(Boyd, 1997, p. 122). In fact, the cold truth is that the fire service must continually plan and evolve. "Today's success means very little in the future. You're only as good as your last performance"(Bruegman & McGrath, 1997, p. 57)!

The work of Burris, Boyd, Bruegman and McGrath identified the need to continuously plan with vision. This concept highlighted a perceived weakness in the fire service. "...of all the tools used in private industry, these two - forecasting and research & development - have traditionally been the weakest in the fire service"(ICMA, 1988, p. 475).

A concern developed while evaluating these fire service issues. Troubling were the observations and lack of progress in addressing fire service concerns. Included in the 1996 report were Statements of National Significance for the conferences of Wingspread I, 1996, Wingspread II, 1976 and Wingspread III, 1986 prepared by the International Association of Fire Chief's Foundation(IAFCF). These reports collectively spanned three (3) decades of fire service evolution. The problems clearly highlighted the resistance of the fire service to change. Appendix A includes the summaries of Wingspread I, II, and III as contained in the 1996 report due to the sizeable influence they exerted on this project.

### Business Strategy and Theory

A literature review of business sources identified examples of innovation, creativity and success. Several items offered perspective and guidance influencing this project. In the book, "Sacred Cows Make the Best Burgers,(1996) Kriegel and Brandt challenge the resistance and tradition of business. Their concept that people naturally must change applies to the fire service. They describe the hesitancy of the business environment to make mistakes, as a "no mistake" ethic. Kriegel and Brandt explain this ethic does more harm than good.

Consider how life changed considering the following mistakes. “Green mold grew accidentally in a petri dish in 1928, and Sir Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin”(Waterman, 1994, p. 201).

Singing in church, Art Fry, a 3m employee, grew irritated that the pieces of paper he used to keep his place in the hymnal kept falling out between services. Spence Silver, another 3m employee, was working on a bonding material. He discovered something sticky but not sticky enough, so he sent a memo around the company asking if anyone needed something like that. Nobody did except Art Fry and the ubiquitous Post-It was born.(Waterman, 1994, p. 202)

Suffice to say. “If you’re not making mistakes you’re not trying anything new”(Kriegel & Brandt, 1996, p. 99).

The issue of reward and personnel involvement was an idea greatly influencing this project. Robert Waterman comments,

To be a true leader, you need to give up control in a narrow sense in order to get control in a much broader sense. As obvious as this now seems to some people, it flies in the face of centuries of conventional management wisdom that flatly states that the bosses job is to tell people what to do.(Waterman, 1994, p. 31)

Further research located practical examples for the theories of giving up of control and encouraging mistakes in a business environment to provide innovation and creativity.

A book written by Kanter, Hao, and Wiersema (1997) demonstrated practical applications of this theory. The Minnesota, Mining and Manufacturing Company (3M) has relied on putting the theory of involving people from its inception. “Our success is attributable to our ability to

attract imaginative and productive people, create a challenging environment, design an organization that does not get in people's way, and offer rewards that nourish both self-esteem and personal bank accounts..."(Kanter, et al. P. 45-46). 3M in addition, allows "all technical personnel to dedicate as much as 15 percent of their time to working on projects of their own choosing"(p. 50). This idea came about as the result of the interference of management discovering a young individual working outside of his responsibilities. "Ignoring that order, Drew went on to invent masking tape, one of 3M's break through products"(p. 51).

Rubbermaid Corporation provided a great example of customer service in practice. When asked how Rubbermaid sustains its success "...the short answer: Rubbermaid's policy, continually expressed and vigorously pursued, is to delight consumers and customers"(Kanter, et al., 1997, p. 171).

The ideas and examples illustrated by Kriegel, Brandt, Waterman, Kanter, Kao and Wiersema influenced this study immensely. The ideas are readily adaptable into the fire service.

Two additional publications evaluated the ability to manage and lead change in the business world.

First, "Leading Change"(Kotter, 1996) evaluated why firms fail and what drives successful change. In developing habits of leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Kotter identified these leaders of successful change as life long learners that would "actively solicit opinions and ideas from others. They don't make the assumption that they know it all or that most other people have little to contribute"(Kotter, 1996, p. 182).

Kotter acknowledged that complacency was the critical contributor as to why firms fail.

“This error is fatal because transformations always failed to achieve their objectives when complacency levels are high”(Kotter, 1996, p. 4).

Daryl Conner, in his book “Managing at the Speed of Change” (1992) expressed specific stages of the resistance to change. This included the identification of key principles that reinforced previous research.

View resistance as a natural and inevitable reaction to the disruptions of expectations.

Encourage and participate in overt expressions of resistance.

Understand that resistance to positive change is just as common as resistance to negatively perceived change and that both reactions follow their own respective sequence of events, which can be anticipated and managed.(p. 145)

Combined, the works of Conner and Kotter contributed to this research. Not only reinforcing concepts of change in the private sector, but identifying a typical working framework to lead, manage and achieve change.

The idea of developing teams and strategic alliances came from a review of a final piece of business literature. Charles Mallory’s “Team-Building” (1991) provided five good reasons to form a team that summarized the importance of alliances.

- To solve problems by drawing on the talents of a variety of individuals
- To foster togetherness in the work place while tackling projects.
- To reduce or eliminate a lack of communication among staff members on projects.

- To heighten productivity by encouraging an atmosphere of cooperation.
- To achieve a solution that might be so unpopular to some, but is the desire of the majority.(Mallory, 1991, p. 2)

Mallory's summary emphasized areas which assist organizations to construct teams and improve communication between personnel. This issue of team building is pertinent to improvement of a creative fire service.

The author used the Webster Collegiate Dictionary as a source of information to clarify any ambiguous terms. (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1985)

Collectively, the literature review provided comprehensive material from a variety of sources. The findings influenced this study by providing a means of comparison between the business community and the fire service. The similarities and identified differences supplied needed information for this research.

## **Procedures**

The research used in preparing this paper focused as follows. The author determined specific locations for the literature review. The locations contained authoritative sources related to the subject matter. The author in addition, conducted a personal interview relative to an implemented program.

The literature review began in June of 1997 at the Learning Resource Center (LRC) at the National Emergency Training Center (NETC). Research continued during the period of

September 1997 through November, 1997 at the business library located at Western Connecticut State University, Danbury, Connecticut. The Danbury Connecticut Public Library provided an opportunity for literature review during the same period. Between July and November, 1997 the author availed his personal and departmental libraries.

Subject matter reviewed focused on two major areas. A primary search documented sources that identified literature specific to the fire service. The search evaluated historical insight into theory and practical applications for this study. A subsequent review assessed business literature relevant to this project. The emphasis of this search was specific to business or private sector applications that would assist the development of creativity in the fire service.

The author conducted a personal interview with Fire Chief Carmen Oliver of the Danbury, Connecticut Fire Department on November 10, 1997 to provide a source of current information on the research. Chief Oliver was instrumental in instituting a customer survey program in his jurisdiction. This program provided insight as to a current application of theories researched. Appendix B provides instruments used in the customer service survey.

### Limitations

Several factors limited this research. Primarily, the lack of fire service programs currently in use was a limitation. The lack of programs contradicted the assumption that methods of innovation and creativity evolved from theory to practical application.

Smaller demographic samples seemed to restrict the implemented programs. This limitation contributed to a lack of consensus documentation. Marketing, customer service or personnel innovation programs did not exist by way of a standard or national model.

A consistent lack of practical application limited the review of business literature and techniques. There was an abundance of opinion and assumption. Further limiting the business review, was the finding that implemented plans and concepts succeeded for a limited period. “Today’s success means very little in the future. You’re only as good as your last performance”(Bruegman & McGrath, 1997)!

Bruegman and McGrath (1997) felt that organizations become prisoners of their own success. They highlight this limitation by referring to examples of companies once described as being leading edge, now either taken over or out of business.

### Definitions:

- Customer - One that purchases systematically or frequently a commodity or service. One that is a patron or uses a service. (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1985)
  
- Demographics - Relating to the dynamic balance of a population, with reference to size, density, distribution and verbal statistics. (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1985)
  
- Marketing - The act or process of selling or purchasing in a market (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1985)



## RESULTS

Responses to each research question illustrate the following findings:

### 1. What problems currently exist in the fire service due to a lack of innovation and change?

Economic changes facing the fire service emerged as a current problem. Chief Kenneth Burris (1996) identified several basic reasons contributing to this problem.

The fire problem is deflating. There is a reduction in severity of fire in the United States. The erosion of the economic base contributes to a declining tax base. The migration of taxpayers out of older cities emphasizes this problem. The cost of service delivery doubled on average due to inflation. Taxpayers are increasingly questioning the quality and effectiveness of the services they are financing. This shift in economics dictates the need of the fire service to address the problem of marketing itself during these changing times.

The fire service has never had a greater need to competitively market itself and its services.

The fire service must recognize the changing environment of society and develop competitive strategies for marketing its services to its stakeholders, representing a wide spectrum of key individuals, public and elected officials. (IAFCF, 1996, p. 6)

Harvey & Fisher succinctly understood the problems of perception and marketing. “The average citizen already perceives a low risk of fire loss”(Harvey & Fisher, 1997, p. 69).

An additional problem facing the fire service is that of complacency. The fire service seems to be facing the mandate and struggle of change and innovation. Bill Manning warned “History is replete with battles lost through complacency”(Manning, September, 1996, p.6). As a result of the research on complacency, the reliance on tradition became evident. “In the fire service, the

status quo, a sense of permanence and tradition, has been the backbone of the culture and a constant for many of our organizations”(Bruegman, 1997, p. 86).

The issues of complacency and tradition revealed an unexpected finding. The potential to use the concepts of innovation and change as buzz words rather than concentrate on the issues. Tom Brennan challenges with specificity “How do you know how to innovate if you don’t know the tradition you’re innovating”(Brennan, 1997, p. 76).

2. What techniques of business innovation may apply to assist the fire service in proactive movement?

Robert Waterman Jr. used a technique that challenged business leaders to innovate, by getting personnel involved.

To be a true leader, you need to give up control in a narrow sense in order to get control in a much broader sense. As obvious as this now seems to people, it flies in the face of centuries of conventional management wisdom that flatly states that the bosses job is to tell people what to do. (Waterman, 1994, p. 31 )

The Minnesota Mining and Manufacturers Company (3M) demonstrated personnel involvement. 3M allowed “all technical personnel to dedicate as much as 15 percent of their time to working on projects of their own choosing”(Kanter, et al. 1997, p. 50).

Applying the technique of customer service would, as well, assist the fire service. The Rubbermaid Corporation provided an excellent practical example “...Rubbermaid’s policy,

continually expressed and vigorously pursued, is to delight consumers and customers”(Kanter, et al. 1997, p. 171).

The development of teams and strategic alliances was a successful innovative technique summarized by Charles Mallory.(1991). Mallory proposed to solve problems by drawing on the talents of a variety of individuals. He recommends fostering togetherness in the work place while tackling projects. Mallory noted by managing an atmosphere of cooperation, productivity increases. The use of teams to build alliances resulted in solutions that might be unpopular to some, but represented the desire of the majority.

Kriegel and Brandt (1996) illustrated a technique of actually encouraging mistakes to dissuade complacency. They revealed that change fails when complacency levels are high.

Results of this study indicated that several mistakes in business have actually resulted in success. Recall the discovery of penicillin by Fleming and the creation of the Post-It note. (Waterman, 1994, p. 201- 202) The business concept of encouraging mistakes minimizes the idea of complacency. “If you’re not making mistakes you’re not trying anything new”(Kriegel & Brandt, 1996, p. 99).

### 3. What factors impede the ability of the fire service to move in a creative fashion?

A primary factor impeding fire service creativity and movement was one of apathy. The lack of awareness of the fire problem has lead to apathy among the public in fact, “Many

mayors are uninformed about the dimension and nature of their own city's fire problem"(Schaenman, et al. 1987, p. 5).

The inability to plan and visualize the future, in a manner comparable to industry proved to be a result of this research. "...of all the tools used in private industry, these two - forecasting, and research and development - have traditionally been the weakest in the fire service"(ICMA, 1988, p. 475).

The cold truth is that the fire service must continually plan and evolve. "Today's success means very little in the future. You're only as good as your last performance"(Bruegman & McGrath, 1997)!

The reluctance to form alliances and partnerships is another impediment to creative movement as identified by the Wingspread IV conference Report, Statements of Critical Issues to The Fire and Emergency Services in the United States. "The fire service must force strategies, alliances, and partnerships at the federal, state and local levels, as well as with the private sector"(IAFCF, 1996, p. 11). What is more important, as Ron Coleman (October, 1996) highlighted it is crucial that fire chiefs learn to operate in the political arena, the consensus building area that will assist in getting things done.

4. What fire service systems or methods are currently in place that focus on innovation and creativity?

An unexpected finding concerning this question, was the lack of programs and systems currently in place that focus on innovation and creativity.

A Fort Lauderdale (Florida) alliance was an exception. The merger of the Fire Rescue Division and Building Department developed a partnership to deliver better customer service. According to Fire Chief Dan Harkins, the mergers accomplished an improvement in communications and eliminated organizational barriers. An additional benefit was a higher order of consideration in municipal budgeting. (Mattern, 1996)

The study reviewed two examples of customer service programs.

An example of a program by Jeffrey S. Smith, he described his idea as simple and inexpensive, yet highly effective. Smith's "comment card" type program allowed for customer comments and a choice of anonymity. His distribution mechanism was to hand out the card to business's, public education classes and walk in customers'. Mr. Smith's system, while designed, has yet to be proven. (Smith, 1997, p. 82-83)

Fire Chief Carmen Oliver of the Danbury Connecticut Fire Department has both designed and implemented a customer service program. Interviewed personally on November 10, 1997, Chief Oliver implemented the program to combine customer expectations with the service currently provided. A dual survey and letter of introduction distinguished between fire suppression and inspection divisions. Chief Oliver expected the survey to portray a true evaluation of the department. The results, while sparse, indicate overall satisfaction from the citizenry.

Members of the fire department initially took offense to the idea of the public evaluating their actions. The publishing of survey comments anonymously in the department newsletter quickly turned the initial reaction into a motivational opportunity. An additional

concern, that despite the form design, a number of surveys returned with a simple yes or no response. Chief Oliver expressed disappointment over the lack of detail to customer expectation the returned surveys provided. (C.J.Oliver, personal interview, November 10,1997)

## **DISCUSSION**

The demands being placed on municipal fire departments nationally are steadily increasing. The mandate to become both innovative and creative is unrelenting. Taxpayers, political officials and the business community have made their expectations clear; the fire service must start to move efficiently.

Resistance and tradition mire this evolution. As documented by three decades of significant statements to the fire service, Wingspread IV outlined critical issues to enhance fire service operations. Unfortunately, with rare exception, most issues still critically face the fire service.

As documented, tradition or the status quo is the backbone of the fire service. The challenge, therefore, becomes the ability to replace the complacency of the norm with the vision for the future.

The importance, as noted, in this project of being mindful of tradition while creatively addressing issues of innovation is crucial. There is a need to respect where we have been to get where we are going.

Perhaps, not learning from previous mistakes is the biggest mistake of all. The business research indicates that encouraging mistakes stimulates creativity. In addition, the involvement of personnel on all levels of an organization is a proven technique to enhance innovation. This idea of participation conflicts with the current organization of the fire service. A rigid command structure and a history of minimizing mistakes are the trademark of the fire service.

The implication of this relationship to the fire service is clear. A need to ascertain a fresh perspective will stimulate ideas. The involvement of the newest firefighter to the seasoned chief officer is necessary. The hesitation to make mistakes on the fireground is applied throughout the Fire Department. The encouragement of creativity, in all divisions of the fire service, will result in a reduction in complacency. Simply stated, “do not penalize mistakes, reward good tries”(Kriegel & Brandt, 1996 p. 99).

The economic change facing the fire service has resulted in shrinking budgetary dollars. The ability of the service to market itself to compete for its share of revenue is critical for survival.

Public perception of the fire problem is one of apathy. The perceived value for services rendered sets the priority for funding. Regardless of the opinion held by the fire service, the taxpayer, as our customer, is responsible for our financial condition.

In business, customer service is a prime component of marketing. To deliver a service that meets the consumers' expectations requires more than a solicited yes or no response. Programs designed to assist in recognizing expectations have been both studied and implemented. The Danbury Fire Department program is a model which targets, specifically, customer response and expectations. The Danbury program applies only to the local level. There is a lack of a

national standard to solicit customer opinion. A need to apply research and isolated programs into a national model is clearly warranted.

The erosion of the economic base has contributed to financial problems for the fire service. There has been a declining tax base from the migration out of older communities. The ability to sustain the growth rate to cover service delivery costs has resulted in taxpayer revolt. Inflation has, on average, doubled the cost of fire service delivery. Increasingly taxpayers have questioned quality and effectiveness of the service provided.

These factors define a need in excess of customer service and marketing, however. The need to construct partnerships, alliances and teams to seek creative funding solutions is needed.

A partnership evaluated was that of the Fort Lauderdale (FLA) Fire Rescue Division and the Building Department. This alliance would provide a cost effective merger of resources. It answered the customer concerns of efficiency by providing a “one stop shopping” atmosphere for the permit process. By marketing this innovative concept, the result was a higher priority rating for municipal budgeting consideration. This example of innovation and proactive movement serves the fire service well.

The political arena exemplifies an alliance that requires additional fire service involvement. The history and tradition of the fire service have been to separate public safety and politics, similar to government separation of church and state. The result has left divergent opinions on responsibility for fire service delivery. Even our mayors are uninformed of the fire problem. The fire service, by comparison, is uninformed of the financial considerations and constraints facing today’s municipal leaders. A strategic alliance would be instrumental in addressing the concerns



of both entities. This potential alliance would require a spirit of cooperation to develop a meaningful team consensus to serve the customer.

Just as the political landscape is continually changing, the ability to foresee changes in the social mosaic are critical to the future fire service.

The business concept of research and development (R&D) exemplifies forecasting. Forecasting change is traditionally a weak fire service trait. The change from R&D to read Research **TO** (emphasis added) Develop would assist the fire administrator. The use of planning models, with new information technology available, will aid the fire service vision.

Today's success is one of passive survival. The ability to access information by technology is a clear priority for the fire service.

In summary, there is a defined need to provide an environment within the fire service to move forward in a creative and innovation fashion. It is critical to be conscious of the history and tradition of the service. However, the challenge to negate the status quo is the mandate of the future.

The ability of the fire service to market itself regarding the respect to the customers' expectation is essential. To achieve full economic consideration it is important to provide a service that delivers perceived value.

The practical application of business examples will enhance the creativity of the fire service. Involvement in the political arena and building strategic alliances will provide answers to new challenges of the future.

The realization that information as power is strategic for the future. Sources of technology, explored and exploited, will provide the visionary techniques to allow the fire service to be on the forefront of innovative delivery.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Economic change dictates that departments develop strategic alliances, partnerships and teams to stimulate innovative solutions to the problems at hand. Therefore, a recommendation that departments diligently cultivate these relationships in both the political and business environments.

A documented program of soliciting ideas from all department personnel to encourage ideas and initiative is a necessity. Implementation of this idea will foster a medium of creativity and assist in stifling complacency. The perspectives of all personnel, within the confines of the department will, provide a fresh outlook. A new firefighter with limited experiences may provide an original opinion overlooked by the seasoned administrator. The front line officer may contribute clarity on issues critical to service delivery. The department administration needs to stand firmly behind this initiative rewarding attempts of creativity rather than expressing concern over failures.

The use of a customer service survey will provide comments as to the department meeting the public's expectation. To administer and evaluate this program on a regular basis is critical. An effort to elicit a detailed response is paramount in developing surveys and questionnaires.

The option of anonymity should also be available. This program shall evaluate all aspects of the department, including suppression, inspection and public education.

The need to investigate the potential of standardizing a national program of customer service warrants additional study.

To develop a consensus marketing strategy for the fire service is indeed a mandate. The literature review highlighted that there has never been a greater need for the fire service to market itself. In the competition for its share of budgetary dollars fire departments need to sell the quality and effectiveness of their service. The limitation found is that there is a lack of a national marketing program. A proactive strategy to “sell” the fire service would result in the easing of financial constraints.

Each day new technology and information avail itself to the fire service. A consistent method of accessing this information, to assist vision and forecast change, is on the horizon. There is a need to address a national effort to educate administrators on accessing information for research and development.

The concept of researching to develop will assist the fire service in maintaining a clear perspective on creativity, innovation and originality. The use of the rich tradition of the fire service a mechanism to enhance creativity, not a crutch to stifle innovation, is critical.

The idea of not losing sight of the customers expectations is significant. The perceived value of the fire service in the community is paramount as we move to the future.

“Thus, the challenge for fire officers is to motivate and provide support for good performance, to encourage innovation, and to provide a consistently high quality service in a changing society”(Grant & Hoover, 1994, p. 429).

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# APPENDIX A

Wingspread III, 1986:  
Statements of National Significance

1. Society in general appears unwilling to take full advantage of the knowledge and technology which has proven effective in mitigating the fire problem.
2. Public fire safety education will not achieve its potential until it is organized in a systematic manner based on human behavior.
3. Professional development in the fire service has made significant strides, but improvement is still needed.
4. Decision makers in local government need better criteria to determine an adequate level of cost-effective fire protection.
5. The fire service should review the effectiveness of the federal fire programs of the U.S. Fire Administration and National Fire Academy to determine if they are of continued benefit in reducing the fire problem.
6. The traditional role of fire departments is changing.
7. Analyzing America's fire problem require a more effective system of data collection.
8. The misuse of alcohol and controlled substances is a serious fire service problem.
9. There is a need for increased emphasis on firefighter safety and health.
10. Personnel management in the fire service is becoming increasingly more complex.



Wingspread II, 1976:  
Statement of National Significance

1. New criteria is needed to measure the impact of fire on the national economy and public welfare.
2. Productivity in the fire service is difficult to measure reliably.
3. The state level of government may have to make a renewed commitment in dealing with the fire problem.
4. The fire service should approach the concept of regionalization without bias.
5. There is a need for a better liaison between the fire service and those who build or design buildings.
6. A means of deliberate and systematic development of all fire service personnel through the executive level is still needed.
7. The firefighter has been suppressed by narrow education and confirming experiences on his job.
8. The problem of arson in the United States has increased to the point where it should be considered a matter of major importance.
9. Fire departments should thoroughly analyze new demands being placed upon them before accepting more responsibilities.
10. It appears that residential smoke detectors hold the more practical potential at this time for savings. The fire service should take leadership in encouraging their widespread use and proper maintenance.
11. Traditional fire services should assume more responsibility and leadership in fire loss management.

Wingspread I, 1966:  
Statements of National Significance

1. Unprecedented demands are being imposed in the fire service by rapid social and technological change.
2. The public is complacent toward the rising trend of life and property loss by the fire service.
3. There is a serious lack of communication between the public and the fire service.
4. Behavior patterns of the public have a direct influence on the fire problem.
5. The insurance interest has exerted a strong influence on the organization of the fire service. This dominance seems to be waning. The fire service must provide the leadership in establishing realistic criteria for determining proper levels of fire protection.
6. Professional status begins with education.
7. The scope, degree, and depth of the educational requirements for the efficient functioning of the fire service must be examined.
8. Increased mobility at the executive level of the fire service will be important to the achievement of professional status.
9. The career development of the fire executive must be systematic and deliberate.
10. Governing bodies and municipal administrators generally do not recognize the need for executive development of the fire officer.
11. Fire service labor and management, municipal officers and administrators must join together if professionalism is to become a reality.
12. The traditional concept that fire protection is strictly a responsibility of the local governments must be reexamined.

# APPENDIX B

March 1, 1997

Main Street  
Danbury, CT 06810

Dear

Recently, you had the opportunity to utilize the services of the Danbury Fire Department. As a concerned resident, could you please take a few minutes of your time and complete the attached questionnaire adding any comments, criticism, or recommendations you feel appropriate. This information will be held in the strictest confidence and be used only for the evaluation and upgrading of the Department and our services.

Your replies can be mailed to:

Fire Chief  
19 New Street  
Danbury, CT 06810

or dropped off at the Office of the Fire Chief located at Fire Headquarters at the above address.

Thank you for taking this time to help us provide better service to you and all residents of our community.

Respectfully yours,

Carmen J. Oliver  
Fire Chief

Danbury Fire Department  
Citizen Questionnaire  
Incident No.

1. Was your emergency telephone call handled in a professional manner by 9-1-1 emergency personnel? If not, please explain.

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2. If your opinion, was the response by the fire department prompt? If not, please explain.

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3. Did the fire department officers and men handle the emergency in an efficient, professional manner to your satisfaction? If not, please explain.

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4. Was consideration taken to limit or avoid further damage to your home or contents? If not, please explain.

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5. Prior to departure of the fire department, did the officer in charge explain what had been done and what you should do now that the emergency is over?

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6. Additional comments or suggestions.

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March 1, 1997

Main Street  
Danbury, CT 06810

Dear

Recently, your place of business was inspected by a Deputy Fire Marshall of the Danbury Fire Department. As a concerned business owner/operator, could you please take a few minutes of your time and complete the attached questionnaire adding any comments, criticism, or recommendations you feel appropriate. This information will be held in the strictest confidence and be used only for the evaluation and upgrading of our inspection bureau and inspectors.

Your replies can be mailed to:

Fire Chief  
19 New Street  
Danbury, CT 06810

or dropped off at the Office of the Fire Chief at Fire Headquarters at the above address.

Thank you for taking this time to help us provide better service to you and your place of business within our community.

Respectfully yours,

Carmen J. Oliver  
Fire Chief

Danbury Fire Department  
Business Questionnaire  
Inspection No.

1. Were you approached prior to the inspection in a courteous and professional manner? If not, please explain.

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2. In you opinion, was the inspection adequate? If not, please explain.

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3. Did the Deputy Fire Marshal conduct himself in an efficient, professional manner to your satisfaction? If not, please explain.

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4. Was consideration taken to limit the disruption to your business while the inspection was taking place? If not, please explain.

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5. Prior to the departure of the Deputy Fire Marshal, did he explain what had been found and what you should do to correct the violations. If not, please explain.

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6. Additional comments or suggestions.

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